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Did Jesus Go to India? A Modern Gospel Forgery.

May 13, 2019

Did Jesus go o India? Last week I mentioned in passing the little-known fact that the apocryphal idea that Jesus traveled to India as a child to learn from the Brahmins, comes to us not from ancient forgeries but relatively modern ones. That raised some interest among readers, and I realized that I haven't actually dealt with this intriguing issue on the blog before. But I did deal with it in one of my books on forgery, the one written for a general audience, Forged: Writing in the Name of God.

In that book, I devote a final chapter to modern examples of the ancient phenomenon, of forgeries of Gospels. I will spread this discussion out over several blog posts, for your reading pleasure.

Here is how I begin the chapter and then discuss the first example, a particularly influential forgery (even though most people who have been influenced by its views have never actually heard of the book!.

Did Jesus Go To India? Let's Find Out More

When I give public talks about the books that did not make it into the New Testament, I am often asked about apocryphal tales that people have heard. What do we know about the "lost years" of Jesus, that gap of time between when he was twelve and thirty? Is it true that he went to India to study with the Brahmins? Was Jesus an Essene? Don't we have a death warrant from Pontius Pilate ordering Jesus' execution? And so on.

Very few of the apocryphal stories that people hear today come from the ancient forgeries I have been examining in this book. Instead, they come from modern forgeries that claim to represent historical facts that scholars or "the Vatican" have allegedly tried to keep from the public. The real facts, however, are that these mysterious accounts have uniformly been exposed as fabrications perpetrated by well-meaning or mischievous writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Their exposure has done little to stop laypeople from believing them.

Modern Forgeries, Lies, and Deceptions

I will discuss four of these writings here, just to give you a taste of the kinds of modern forgeries that have been widely read. All four, and many others, are discussed and demolished in two interesting books by bona fide scholars of Christian antiquity, Edgar Goodspeed, a prominent American New Testament scholar of the mid-twentieth century, and Per Beskow, a Swedish scholar of early Christianity in the 1970s.[1]

The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ

One of the most widely disseminated modern forgeries is called The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ.[2] From this account, we learn that Jesus went to India during his formative teen years, the "lost years" before his public ministry, and there learned the secrets of the East. The book made a big splash when it appeared in English in 1926; but as it turns out, it had already been exposed as a fraud more than thirty years earlier. The reading public, it is safe to say, has a short attention span.

The book was first published in France in 1894 as …

To see my discussion of this fascinating account, you will need to belong to the blog. If you don't belong yet, why not join? You'll get tons for your money. And it's not much money: just a couple of bucks a month! Even better, every buck goes to charity. Who loses?

…La vie inconnue de Jésus Christ

by a Russian war correspondent named Nicolas Notovitch. Almost immediately it was widely disseminated and translated. In one year it appeared in eight editions in French, with translations into German, Spanish, and Italian. There was one edition published in the U.K. and three separate editions in America.

The book consisted of 244 paragraphs arranged in fourteen chapters. Notovitch starts the book by explaining how he "discovered" it. In 1887, he was allegedly traveling in India and Kashmir, where he heard from lamas of Tibet stories about a prophet named Issa, the Arabic form (roughly) of the same Jesus. His further travels took him to the district of Ladak, on the border of India and Tibet, to the famous Tibetan Buddhist monastery of Hemis. While there he heard further stories and was told that written records of his life of Issa still survived.

Notovitch left the monastery without learning anything further. But after a couple of days, he had a bad accident, falling off his horse and breaking his leg. He was carried back to the monastery to recuperate, and while there came to be on friendly terms with the Abbot. When Notovitch inquired further about the stories of Issa, the Abbot agreed to give him the full account. *He produced two thick volumes, written in Tibetan, and began to read them out to Notovitch, in the presence of a translator who explained what the texts said, while Notovitch took notes.*

Did Jesus Go to India When He was 13?

The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ is the published edition of the careful notes that Notovitch allegedly took. **When Jesus was thirteen, according to the account, he joined a caravan of merchants to go to India to study their sacred laws.** He spent six years with the Brahmins, learning their holy books, the Vedas. But Jesus was completely disenchanted with the Indian caste system and openly began to condemn it. *This raised the ire of the Brahmins who decided to put him to death.*

Jesus fled to join a community of Buddhists, from whom he learned Pali, the language of Theravada Buddhism, and mastered the Buddhist texts. He next visited Persia and preached to the Zoroastrians.

Finally, as a twenty-nine-year-old, armed with all the sacred knowledge of the East, he returned to Palestine and began his public ministry. The narrative concludes by summarizing his words and deeds and giving a brief account of his death. **The story of his life was then allegedly taken by Jewish merchants back to India, where those who had known Issa as a young man realized that it was the same person.** They then wrote down the full account.

It was Published as a Factual Account

Although the narrative of The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ may sound like a rather second-rate novel, it was published as a historically factual account and was widely believed as providing the key to the questions that Christians had long asked about the lost years of Jesus. What was he doing then? And how had he acquired such extensive and compelling religious knowledge before beginning his public ministry?

It was not long, however, before scholars interested in historical fact began to question the account and expose it as a complex hoax. The tale was taken on by no less eminent an authority than Max Müller, the greatest European scholar of Indian culture of the late nineteenth century, who showed that the tale of the "discovery" of the book and the stories it told were filled with insurmountable implausibilities.

If this great book was a favorite at the monastery of Hemis, why is it not found in either of the comprehensive catalogs of Tibetan literature? How is it that the Jewish merchants who went to India with tales of Jesus happened to meet up with precisely the Brahmins who knew Issa as a young man – out of the millions of people in India? And how did Issa's former associates in India realize, exactly, that the crucified man was their former student?

Unknown Life was Debunked

In 1894 an English woman who had read the Unknown Life visited Hemis monastery. She made inquiries and learned that no Russian had ever been there, no one had been nursed back to health after breaking his leg, and they had no books describing the life of Issa. The next year a scholar, J. Archibald Douglas, went and interviewed the Abbot himself, who informed him that there had been no European with a broken leg in the monastery during his fifteen years in charge of the community.

Moreover, he had been a lama for forty-two years and was well acquainted with Buddhist literature. **Not only did he never read aloud a book about Issa, to a European or to anyone else, he was also certain that no such book as The Unknown Life existed in Tibet.**

Further internal implausibilities and inaccuracies of the story are exposed by both Goodspeed and Beskow. Today there is not a recognized scholar on the planet who has any doubts about the matter. The entire story was invented by Notovitch, who earned a good deal of money and a substantial amount of notoriety for his hoax.

[1] Edgar J. Goodspeed, Modern Apocrypha (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956); Per Beskow, Strange Tales about Jesus: A Survey of Unfamiliar Gospels (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

[2] Discussed in Goodspeed, Modern Apocrypha, pp. 3-14; and Beskow, Strange Tales, pp. 57-65.

May 13th, 2019 | Christian Apocrypha, Historical Jesus

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36 Comments

saavoss May 13, 2019 at 11:39 am Log in to Reply

Is the hoax that Issa was Jesus? Was there an Issa who was "mistakenly" identified as Jesus? Or was there never an Issa in India at all? Did Issa not exist? How contrived is this hoax or forgery?

BDEhrman May 14, 2019 at 12:03 pm Log in to Reply

Issa was made up.

rivercrowman May 13, 2019 at 1:10 pm Log in to Reply

Off-topic Bart, It takes continuing study to more fully absorb the contents of your books. I have "Forged: Writing in the Name of God," where I'm currently focusing on 2 Thessalonians. … Then, I also have in my personal library your even more in-depth book "Forgery and Counterforgery," in which I have pinpointed the sentence on page 157 that says, in part, "In 1862 Hilgenfeld made the argument still favored by *many* scholars today, that 2 Thessalonians was forged precisely in order to replace its predecessor as Paul's (only) letter to the Thessalonians." … Would I be somewhat safe to say that you are numbered among the many? … Thanks again!

BDEhrman May 14, 2019 at 12:07 pm Log in to Reply

No, I'm not sure about that. In the longer book I argue against it by pointing out that 2 Thess refers explicitly back to 1 Thess, which doesn't make sense if it wanted it to be replaced/taken out of existence.

Edward_Dodge May 13, 2019 at 1:21 pm Log in to Reply

When I was young I came across a compelling book claiming to be lost teachings of Jesus hidden away in the Vatican vaults, The Essene Gospel of Peace. I found it to be full of interesting mystical knowledge, but I learned that it was a fraud in that it was fiction written in the 1930s and not 2000 years old. Judging from the reviews on Amazon, people still believe it to be real.

https://www.amazon.com/Essene-Gospel-Peace-Book-One/dp/0895640007

AstaKask May 13, 2019 at 1:56 pm Log in to Reply

But still, there are no contradictions between this tale and the Bible, so it must be true.

JMJ May 13, 2019 at 2:06 pm Log in to Reply

A dear friend told me she was learning Kundalini Yoga because Jesus Christ went to India to learn it during the lost years to prepare for His ministry. I asked her if that's the case why did He never mention it? Why did Jesus never mention Plato, Socrates, or Confucius? Great people always seem to mention other great people, especially from the past. This is one of the reasons why at one point in time I wondered if Jesus Christ Himself was really just a myth. This blog posts, along with Bart's books, are putting together pieces of the puzzle.

Hon Wai Lai May 13, 2019 at 4:14 pm Log in to Reply

How indeed had Jesus acquired such extensive and compelling religious knowledge before beginning his public ministry from an apparently humble background? Was he a religious and ethical genius, or was he unexceptional?

BDEhrman May 14, 2019 at 1:10 pm Log in to Reply

I think it's hard to know how much he knew, and how he did learn what he knew. We have no indications of the latter in the Gospels. Possibly a combination of unusual attentiveness, commitment, and genius? Hard to say.

Kirktrumb59 May 16, 2019 at 10:19 am Log in to Reply

Same questions re: the William Shakespeare whom we know really existed, he who donated his second best bed, etc. This William Shakespeare: same one who wrote the plays? If so, where did he learn all that stuff (some of which clearly is inaccurate). In Stratford?. The playwright whose life prior to the London gig is almost totally undocumented ("lost years")?.

EricBrown May 13, 2019 at 5:50 pm Log in to Reply

Isn't the Book of Mormon partly about the previously-unknown visit of the resurrected Christ to the unchurched new world?

BDEhrman May 14, 2019 at 1:14 pm Log in to Reply

Yup.

PattyIt May 13, 2019 at 6:01 pm Log in to Reply

Well, at least the Russian picked a time in Jesus's life where one could fill in details unlike a certain recent apologist that has an entire side trip to Egypt between two consecutive verses of the gospel of Luke! ????

godspell May 13, 2019 at 6:27 pm Log in to Reply

I don't see why not, if Tarzan did. (Underrated movie.)

AntiochusEpimanes May 14, 2019 at 12:40 am Log in to Reply

I've wondered how far ancient Jews were ' scattered' in the ancient world. Do you know of any good resources that show where ancient Jews lived? For example, in 700 BC, then 500 BC, 300 BC…

BDEhrman May 14, 2019 at 1:18 pm Log in to Reply

Not really. You might try John Barclay's book Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora.

Naifeh May 14, 2019 at 1:10 am Log in to Reply

There is a humorous modern account of these "hidden" years telling some of the same stories called "Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal." It was about the misadventures of Christ and Biff during the missing years.I thought the first part of the book was so funny that we selected it for our Dallas book club meeting. Unfortunately, others in the club did not find it as nearly as funny and we were asked to leave the book club. Oh well.

jhbaker731 May 14, 2019 at 6:36 pm Log in to Reply

Who do you meet with in Dallas that shares your views? I'm getting slaughtered because of my beliefs.

BDEhrman May 15, 2019 at 10:58 am Log in to Reply

I'd start by asking some of the professors at SMU, e.g., Mark Chancey, a fine scholar of NT/Early Christainity.

RonaldTaska May 14, 2019 at 5:33 am Log in to Reply

Fascinating! Humans have a HUGE capacity to make things up and have others believe the made up stories making it quite difficult for us to know what happened yesterday much less what happened 2,000 years ago when reliable historical material was much less available than it is now. Thanks

SJB May 14, 2019 at 8:35 am Log in to Reply

Do you suppose that the historical Jesus would have even been aware that such a place as India even existed?

thanks

BDEhrman May 14, 2019 at 1:24 pm Log in to Reply

Nope. He would have had no idea.

AndrewJenkins May 14, 2019 at 1:37 pm Log in to Reply

Maybe another interesting question is whether Buddhist thought had any influence on Jesus and any others in 1st Century Palestine. After all, the Buddhist Emperor Asoka erected pillars in Afghanistan and elsewhere, some of which had inscriptions in Aramaic (and Greek), which mention the propagation of moral rules, which Ashoka called "Dharma" in his Edicts, consisting of the abandonment of vanity and respect for the life of the people and of animals. Given the quite high levels of trade between India and the Roman Empire, is there a case for mutual influence here?

BDEhrman May 15, 2019 at 10:43 am Log in to Reply

I don't know of any trade routes coming into Galilee; and from our surviving sources we don't know of any Buddhist influence in the area. Too bad!

sadiq.salman February 22, 2021 at 12:36 am Log in to Reply

Hello! I've recently read a book titled 'Deliverance from Cross' by Mr. Zafrullah Khan (past President of both UN General Assembly and the International Court of Justice). The book does not deal with the "lost years". Rather the thesis is that Jesus was taken down from the cross unconscious but alive, and then migrated in search of the lost tribes through Syria, Iran and ultimately to Afghanistan where he found, and successfully preached to the Israelites there. Further it is claimed that Jesus' grave can be found to this day at the Roza Bal Shrine in Srinagar, Kashmir. There is some striking evidence provided in the book that makes me feel it is very possible Jesus did not die on the cross (I.e. short duration hanging, legs not broken, Pilate's sympathy). This also makes sense of reports that Jesus is seen by his disciples later and tells them he is not a ghost and he essentially is in hiding. Many references to historical works are also provided in the book proving that the Afghans are decendants of the lost tribes. Would be very interested to hear of your opinion on this theory. Free e-book is available for download online.

BDEhrman February 22, 2021 at 6:12 pm Log in to Reply

YEs, the basic theory has been around for a long time, and as with all the other expressions, there is no evidence for this view and a ton of evidence against it. If you want to see a really spectacular account of Jesus' not dying on the cross, see Hugh Schonfield's book The Passover Plot (in the early 1970s?). (An early argument for this was in Heinrich Paulus, Das Leben Jesus, 1827). People who write books like this are generally makin' stuff up and either don't know or are not paying attention to what we know about crucifixion practices and about how and what we can actually know about the historical JEsus.

sadiq.salman July 28, 2021 at 12:17 am

Hi Bart. Thanks for your response! Ive read into these different theories further and strongly believe the 'swoon' and migration theory of Jesus is most probable given the historical evidence we have regarding Jesus, the crucifixion event, and based on reason:
1. As stated in my earlier comment I believe there is sufficient evidence from the NT accounts that lead to a high probability of Jesus not having died on the cross. Even Pilate marvelled that he could have died so soon and the Jews doubted it. Further Joseph was prepared before hand with aloes and Myrrh which were healing and analgesic agents of the time.
2. If someone is said to have died from an execution attempt, is then missing from their tomb, and then seen alive bearing partially healed wounds, I believe the most rational position is to conclude the execution attempt failed.
3. To move away, in secret, to a far away land is the most rational action to expect from an individual who has survived an execution attempt as they would not want to be caught and strung up again.

sadiq.salman September 29, 2021 at 12:51 am Log in to Reply

Hello. A quick online search showed that there were two major ancient trade routes that directly connected Judea and India: 1) the Maritime Silk road which was being used from at least 2nd Century BCE, and 2) The Silk Road that connected to the Grand Trunk Road; being used from at least 130 BCE which traversed from Damascus (very close to Judea) through Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, modern day Pakistan and finally India. These were heavily prosperous trade routes that were in use from at least 100 BCE and for many centuries thereafter.

I believe a clear evolution in the Gospels can be seen of the writers trying to downplay any doubt of Jesus' death that could enter a readers mind. I say this as:
1. The Synoptics mention Simon carrying the cross. John does not
2. Only Mark mentions Pilate marvelling that Jesus died so soon. The later Gospels omit it.
3. Only John mentions the spearthrust, the Synoptics don't.

From a reading Mark alone I don't see how a healthy young man could die in 3 to 6 hours while death normally took 2 to 3 days according to historians, and while the two criminals did not die. Am I missing something?

BDEhrman September 29, 2021 at 6:05 pm Log in to Reply

In the Gospels Jesus is flogged within an inch of his life before the crucifixion, and it is usually thought that this would have expedited his death.

sadiq.salman September 30, 2021 at 2:52 pm

In reading the Gospel accounts I do not see enough details to reasonably believe Jesus would've been on the brink of death before crucifixion. John states Jesus carried his own cross to Golgotha – which would be impossible if he were near-dead. Two questions have always agitated my mind regarding the purported flogging at Pilates command:

1. Why would Pilate, a man who all Gospels are unified in showing repeatedly trying to save Jesus from being crucified, then proceed to order his vicious flogging? And then after "taking him away" and flogging Jesus to near death, later doubt, along with the priests, at why Jesus had died so soon. It's not internally consistent. Is it not reasonable to expect Pilate to have extended as much leniency as he could've in a situation where he was being pressured to make a judgement against an innocent against his will?

2. Was Jesus even flogged? Luke's gospel seems to be the most internally consistent here. Pilate in sympathy offers to punish and release Jesus, but the Jews insist he be crucified. Giving in to their demands he simply hands Jesus over – no flogging/scourging is mentioned.

Your thoughts?

BDEhrman October 2, 2021 at 8:10 am

It is extremely important to separate two things in our minds when reading the Gospels: ONE is what the Gospels say as narratives the OTHER is what really happened. These are NOT the same thing. If we dn't realize that, we run into all sorts of non-sensical things, like why would a particular character do this or that when we know historically that it is not the sort of thing that would have happened. True, it wouldn't. But this is a STORY we're reading, not a factually researched documentary. I don't know of Jesus was flogged or not, historically. But I'd say HISTORICALLY there's nothing implausible about it. Pilate was not at all a lenient person. He was famously brutal.

sadiq.salman December 29, 2021 at 11:56 pm

I understand the Gospels contain things which may not have happened, but also contain things that probably did happen. And as you've stated in the past, with the Gospels being our best source regarding Jesus' life, a historian's job is to determine what probably happened (using reason, Textualcriticsm techniques, and other evidence at hand).

I believe my conclusion reasonably stems from that approach. Namely that the swoon/migration theory provides the most explanatory power of the events that one can dilute from the Gospels as probably having occurred.

Pilate, as most humans, was probably not one dimensionaly evil. Where all Gospels speak of him recognizing Jesus' innocence I do not believe it unreasonable to believe he excercised some leniency and not flogged Jesus viciously. Scholar Norm Young reaches a similar conclusion from a different angle, stating a light whipping as a probable occurrence.

Another important question: why did Jesus die so quickly and not the two criminals if brutal flogging was a guaranteed practice for all?

Lastly, Romans centurions of that time cannot not be expected to be infallible in determining when death had occurred, when even fully trained doctors in our time are still not.

P.S. this is truly a fascinating subject

bholly72 May 17, 2019 at 4:10 pm Log in to Reply

Well, if Jesus studied Buddhism in India, he was a very inattentive student. There is no evidence of Buddhist teaching in the Gospels (well, maybe a little if you rad Thomas in a certain way). In Buddhism, there is no God, no soul, no sin, and enlightenment, not salvation, is the goal.

johnsotdj July 9, 2019 at 10:17 am Log in to Reply

This reminds me of another modern forgery, The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ, first published I believe in 1908, but popular in the 1970s for obvious reasons (this is the dawning of.the age of Aquarius). I was a witnessing evangelical Christian at the time, and was encouraged to consider books like this, contra my "one-way to God" hang up! The "unknown years of Jesus" provided fertile ground for stories of travels in the East!

joks July 21, 2021 at 4:05 pm Log in to Reply

Could you provide with me with a list of other Biblical scholars who have researched and written about the story of Jesus being in India?

BDEhrman July 22, 2021 at 4:32 am Log in to Reply

Well, there's really not a lot of research for biblical scholars to do, since the idea is not in the Bible and doesn't start appearing as a them until modern times in forgeried GOspels. But if you want to read about scholars who have shown that these GOspels are 19th century forgeries instead of ancient, check out the final chapter in my book Forged where I talk about it, referring to the books that remove any doubt about the matter, with a history of the discussion, written by Edgar Goodspeed and Per Besko.

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